
Liquid Modernity and the Holocaust

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Abstract: In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Zygmunt Bauman argued that the Holocaust had been by no means a negation of the civilising process, but was, on the contrary, its consequence. He claimed that the constitutive features of solid modernity, such as bureaucratic culture, the rise of instrumental rationality and the domination of blueprint utopia, were reflected in the genesis and course of the Holocaust. Bauman's main aim in writing the book was to make fundamental changes in the problematization of modernity in the social sciences, and to highlight the need to develop norms, values and attitudes that were in opposition to modernity. An overview of these facts provides a starting point for my analysis of Bauman's later analyses of the Holocaust. By focusing on two issues that he emphasised in the context of the genesis of the Holocaust, namely the mechanism of adiaphorization and the process of the social construction of "otherness", I show how these phenomena materialize in liquid modernity. I identify their connections with a range of features of the liquid modern condition, including the development of individualism and consumer culture, the sense of insecurity and the "nostalgic turn". I emphasise that, according to Bauman, both moral indifference and xenophobia are increasingly significant phenomena in contemporary society, which may entail pernicious – and currently barely foreseeable – consequences. I argue that the way Bauman wrote about both solid and liquid modernity was characterised by a dystopian poetics, which was a foundation for his utopian thought.

Keywords: modernity; Holocaust; Zygmunt Bauman; adiaphorization; otherness

Introduction

In his preface to *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Zygmunt Bauman underlined the point that his intention in writing the book was not to offer a groundbreaking view of the history of the Holocaust. He explicitly acknowledged that his insights were based on the specialist research of other authors, to whom he owed "a boundless debt" (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. xii).¹ However, somewhat contrary to the spirit of this declaration, Bauman's analyses of the genesis and course of the Holocaust came to be one of the paramount points of reference in Holocaust studies at the turn of the 20th century (see e.g. Bauer, 2001; Palmer & Brzeziński, 2022; Vetlesen, 2005). Similarly heated polemics centre around the issues that Bauman proclaimed were his primary goal for *Modernity and the Holocaust* (see e.g. Cannon, 2016; Ray, 2022; Tokarska-Bakir, 2022). Specifically, Bauman stated that his book was supposed to contribute to transforming the ways in which the modern condition was problematised and to revising the standpoint the social sciences took on the relationship between the civilizing process and morality (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, pp. 12–13). Bauman's belief that "[m]odern civilization was not the Holocaust's *sufficient* condition; it was, however, most certainly its *necessary* condi-

1 The authors included first and foremost Raul Hilberg (1961/1985), Hannah Arendt (1951) and Richard L. Rubenstein (1975), but the list of scholars who had influenced Bauman's model of the interconnectedness of the Holocaust and the constitutive features of modernity is obviously much longer.

tion” (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. 13; italics in original) has been fiercely discussed in the investigations of the Enlightenment legacy ever since. Abundant attention has also been lavished on Bauman’s appeal in *Modernity and the Holocaust* to “expand the theoretical model of the civilizing process, so as to include the latter’s tendency to demote, exprobate and delegitimize the ethical motivations of social action” (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. 28).

After the publication of *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman repeatedly revisited his examination of the Holocaust in a range of contexts, including his explorations of the genesis and course of other genocides (Z. Bauman, 2008, pp. 78–109), of the modes of Holocaust commemoration (Z. Bauman, 1994) and, in the most general terms, of the nature of evil (Z. Bauman, 2006, pp. 54–71). He often referred to his conclusions gleaned from the inquiry into the Holocaust in his examinations of liquid modernity. This problem field will be the focus of my argument in this paper.

Importantly, starting in 2000 (Z. Bauman, 2000b), Bauman relinquished “postmodernity” as a moniker of the contemporary condition and, instead, proposed a distinction into two types of modernity. He claimed that the Holocaust had happened in what he called “solid” modernity. He identified solid modernity with an aspiration derived from the Enlightenment mode of thought to establish structures, institutions and norms that would be governed by rational motivations and immune to the passage of time. The label of “liquid modernity” was used by Bauman to refer to the late 20th and early 21st centuries. His catalogue of the constitutive features of this period primarily comprised persistent – and accelerating – variability and a new appreciation for the multiplicity and diversity of possible life paths. However, even though this condition in many respects stood in stark contrast to solid modernity, the two also had some features in common in Bauman’s view. These are, *inter alia*, the mechanism of adiaphorization and the process of constructing “otherness”. Bauman’s thought on these phenomena is analysed in the following two sections of this paper. In conclusion, I will consider his position on the risk of the tragedy of the Holocaust happening again.

Adiaphorization in solid and liquid modernity

Bauman coined the term “adiaphorization” on the basis of the Greek *adiaphoron*, a notion developed in Stoic philosophy and later taken up by Christian theologians. In both these contexts, it denoted a morally indifferent action. This meaning was at the core of Bauman’s concept of “adiaphorization”, which he used to depict the effects of social organization. In a lecture delivered upon receiving the Amalfi European Award for *Modernity and the Holocaust*, which was then included in subsequent editions of the book, Bauman said: “[O]rganization does not promote immoral behaviour; it does not

sponsor evil [...], yet it does not promote good either, despite its own self-promotion. It simply renders social action *adiaphoric* [...] – neither good nor evil” (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. 215). This observation was part of Bauman’s polemic against the belief about the social origin of morality, which was endorsed by, for example, Émile Durkheim and his followers (Durkheim, 1895/1982). Against their claims, Bauman argued that rationality and effectiveness formed the axis of the organisation of collective life, with the reduction of moral impulses being a principal means to this end. “Social organization may therefore be described as a machine that keeps moral responsibility afloat”, he insisted (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. 216).

These conclusions stemmed from Bauman’s analyses of the modern condition. Following Max Weber, Bauman contended that pivotal to it was the pre-eminence of instrumentally rational action intimately bound up with “the disenchantment of the world” (Weber, 1922/1978). Inspired by Sigmund Freud’s theory as read through the studies of Norbert Elias, Bauman came to believe that, in modernity, individuals were tethered and entangled in a dense mesh of regulation and control (Elias, 1939/2000; Freud, 1930/2010). The impact of Michel Foucault’s thought on Bauman’s work can be seen in the latter’s reflection on the proliferation of disciplinary mechanisms in the age of modernity (Foucault, 1975/1977). These and other influences (e.g. Gellner, 1983; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002; see Smith, 1999) made Bauman perceive modernity as an era in which attempts were launched to bring individuals into absolute subordination to the social system and, consequently, suppress their individuality, will and, most importantly in our context, morality. The mechanism of adiaphorization, as Bauman saw it, was effectively serviceable in achieving the modern ideal of a perfectly ordered and at the same time fully rational world (Z. Bauman, 1987, 1991).

To Bauman, the Holocaust was an expression of and a testimony to this ordering ambition. Consequently, in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, he insisted that: “*The Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture*” (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. x; italics in original). Bauman (1989/2000c, pp. 214–217) claimed that three properties of adiaphorization were at work in the Holocaust. Firstly, the Holocaust was arranged as a chain of interconnected operations, many of which were detached from their ultimate outcome, so much so that this very distance undercut any moral reflection on them. Secondly, the manner in which the victims of the Holocaust were portrayed in the national-socialist propaganda aimed to exclude them from the field of obligation, which Bauman depicted as “effacing the face” in reference to Emmanuel Lévinas’s ethical thought (Lévinas, 1961/1969). Thirdly, and lastly, the process of the Holocaust consisted of numerous narrowly specialized tasks, each of which as such was evaluated in technical and organizational, rather than moral, terms. Given the impact of these factors, Bauman claimed that modernity had not only made the Holocaust possible but also framed it as a rational bureaucratic

process. In depicting this process, he not infrequently availed himself of comparisons to work organization in modern enterprises.²

In the metaphor that opens *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman likened the traditional representation of the Holocaust to a “picture” on the wall. In this model, the Holocaust is taken to have been a complete antithesis of the values, ideals and norms of the civilized world. “In that world, murderers murdered because they were mad and wicked and obsessed with a mad and wicked idea”, Bauman wrote (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. vii). That view of the Holocaust, one which he admitted he had himself endorsed for a long time,³ did not imply, he claimed, that it was necessary to reappraise the modern organization of social life. On the contrary, this standpoint fully legitimized the existing order. As opposed to that, Bauman proposed comparing the Holocaust to “a window” in the wall. “Looking through that window”, he averred (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. viii), “one can catch a rare glimpse of many things otherwise invisible. And the things one can see are of the utmost importance not just for the perpetrators, victims and witnesses of the crime, but for all those who are alive today and hope to be alive tomorrow”. Adopting this analytical approach, Bauman crucially realized, among his other insights, that it was indispensable to strive to foster a social reality in which the mechanism of adiphORIZATION would be abolished or at least curbed to the minimum.

With this objective in mind, Bauman was quite hopeful when watching the transformations unfolding in Western civilization towards the end of the 20th century, as the constitutive features of modernity were systematically being dismantled (Z. Bauman, 1987, 1991). In this regard, he ascribed a particular role to morality. His concept of postmodern ethics, whose foundation he had already outlined in *Modernity and the Holocaust* and which he continued to refine and hone in his subsequent publications (e.g. Z. Bauman, 1993, 1995, 2008; Z. Bauman & Donskis, 2013; see Brzeziński, 2008), was informed by the assumption that the new social condition which was taking shape at the time would make it possible to bring to the fore moral impulses, which had so far been effectively stifled in human beings.⁴ The collapse of the “grand narratives” of the Enlightenment (Lyotard, 1979/1984), with Nazism and Communism alike among them, combined with the related new appreciation of singularity and difference (Derrida, 1967/1997) could, in Bauman’s view, revolutionize human relations and the entire social order. He wrote: “The denizens of the postmodern era are, so to speak, forced to stand face-to-face with their moral autonomy, and so also with their moral responsibility. [...] This is [...] the chance the moral selves never confronted before” (Z. Bauman, 1995, p. 43).

2 This outlook sparked a heated discussion among Holocaust researchers. Bauman’s view was criticized by, among other scholars, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (2022), Yehuda Bauer (2001) and Arne Johan Vetlesen (2005).

3 Change in Bauman’s view of the Holocaust was crucially fostered by a book his first wife, Janina, wrote on the basis of her memories of the Warsaw ghetto (J. Bauman, 1986). On the connections between the respective work of Zygmunt Bauman and Janina Bauman, see e.g. Pollock (2022); Wagner (2022).

4 Bauman’s concept of postmodern ethics has invited ample critical response. See e.g. Brzeziński (2008); Campbell & Till (2010); Crone (2008); Hirst (2014); Hookway & Ezzy (2017); Junge (2001).

Admittedly, Bauman's optimism in those days was by no means unalloyed by doubt. The soil in which his doubt germinated was provided, in particular, by his own explorations of the culture of individualism (e.g. Z. Bauman, 2001) and consumer society (e.g. Z. Bauman, 2007a). Not only did Bauman claim that these developments carried an adiaphoric potential, but he also asserted that this potential was as powerful as that inherent to the constitutive processes of solid modernity. Capturing these affinities, he elucidated in 2000:

This late-modern (or "liquid modern" [...]) "adiaphorization mark two" works through *disengagement* and self-distantiation, in sharp distinction from the past, bureaucratic form, which presumed tight engagement as the condition of ubiquitous surveillance, regular monitoring, normative regulation and routine coercion. The results, though, are pretty much similar: growing chunks of human interaction are "ethically defused" – exempt from moral evaluation and emancipated from insidious monitoring and corrective impact of moral conscience. (Z. Bauman, 2000a, p. 95; italics in original)

Bauman maintained that the culture of individualism resulted in making individuals bear complete responsibility for their own lives, which stood in direct contradiction to taking "responsibility for the Other" (Z. Bauman, 1993; see Z. Bauman, 2009). "Not that I am particularly selfish [...]", Bauman explicated (Z. Bauman, 2000a, p. 95), "it is rather that I and the Other are similarly individuals – we are both self-sustained entities [...] – and so mutual dependency would be degrading and demeaning for the Other as much as it is for me". The adiaphoric fallout from individualization was, in his view, cemented by pressures from consumption, which was becoming increasingly central to social life.⁵ Inspired by, among other influences, the ideas of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2002), Bauman explicated that the properties specific to the relation between people and products they purchased were transposed onto other spheres of life, including human relationships. This meant that the perception of the Other in terms of moral obligations was more and more often ousted by an expectation of benefiting from relations one entered (Z. Bauman, 2007a). *Eo ipso*, both the culture of individualism and the mechanisms of consumer society considerably boosted the adiaphorizing potential of the postmodern condition (Z. Bauman & Haugaard, 2008).

Bauman also examined the dimensions of adiaphorization common to solid and liquid modernity. He particularly focused on the ramifications of technological development.⁶ In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, he concluded that "the technical-administrative success of the Holocaust was due in part to the skilful utilization of 'moral sleeping pills' made available by modern bureaucracy and modern technology" (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. 26). He believed that technological solutions contributed to triggering

5 Continuous critique of consumer culture was integral to Bauman's work (see Brzeziński, 2018). Both as a researcher at the University of Warsaw (e.g. Z. Bauman, 1966) and throughout his career as an emigre (e.g. Z. Bauman, 2007a), he vocally opposed the assumptions behind and the manifestations of the increasing salience of consumption in social life.

6 Bauman's insights into the relation of ethics and technology were inspired by the thought of Hans Jonas (1979/1984).

“moral blindness” by enabling the killers to reduce direct contact with the killed. As a result, the perpetrators could regard themselves as operators of modern machines and installations rather than as participants in genocide.

Bauman revisited these insights in the early 21st century, when he pondered the social consequences of contemporaneous technological inventions. He recognized their adiaphoric impact as clearly as in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, so much so that he contended: “By the start of the twenty-first century, military technology had managed to float and so ‘depersonalize’ responsibility to an extent unimaginable in Orwell’s or Arendt’s time” (Z. Bauman & Lyon, 2013, p. 77). In his further discussion of cutting-edge devices, such as smart missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, he pointed out that “the most seminal technological developments in recent years have not been sought and accomplished in relation to the murderous powers of weapons, but in the area of the ‘adiaphorization’ of military killing” (Z. Bauman & Lyon, 2013, p. 77). Essentially, Bauman augmented his previous investigations of the role and relevance of technology by examining “collateral damage”,⁷ that is, unanticipated and negative upshots of certain processes and their progression. He stated that as such losses were regarded as an inseparable aspect of technological development, its possible tragic effects either were justified by the public or went without any moral sanction.

Concluding this part of my argument, let me stress again that the theme of adiaphorization was vital to Bauman’s explorations of both solid and liquid modernity, and that it was also the cornerstone of his critique of both systems. If one of his aims in *Modernity and the Holocaust* was to bring into relief the frequently imperceptible, albeit morally pernicious, consequences of the development of civilization, he set a similar goal for his reflection on the culture of individualism, consumer society and technological advancement as part of his inquiry into liquid modernity. Some critics object that such a vision of modernity is one-sided and profoundly dystopian (see e.g. Kilminster, 2017; Rattansi, 2017).⁸ While such charges cannot really be dismissed, it makes a lot of sense to look into Bauman’s intentions in embracing this form of poetics. The direction in which he was developing his engaged sociology at the time strongly suggests that he sought to warn against the further progression of liquid modern adiaphorization and at the same time to foreground the urgency of promoting postmodern ethics as a counterbalance to it. As Henning Bech has usefully noted, many critics “read Bauman’s categories and analyses as if he intends to present a full, quasi-objective diagnosis of past and existing societies – whereas, rather, they are (or may be read more fruitfully as) founded on ethical concerns” (Bech, 2007, p. 374).

7 Bauman devoted a separate book to considerations on collateral damage (Z. Bauman, 2011).

8 The fact that Bauman relied on hyperbole in his critique of consumer culture has been empirically confirmed by the research carried out by Mateusz Marciniak (2011). On the idiosyncrasies of Bauman’s sociology, see e.g. Blackshaw (2016).

Solid- and liquid modern dimensions of otherness

Two years before the release of *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman published *Legislators and Interpreters* (Z. Bauman, 1987), in which he drew on Ernest Gellner's distinction between "wild" and "garden" cultures (Gellner, 1983) to scrutinize in depth the processes that were formative of the modern condition and channelled its evolution. Bauman identified "wild cultures" with organizations in which tradition determined the ways social life functioned, and the order was additionally safeguarded by the social elite of the time, or "gamekeepers" in his parlance. They accepted the existence of cultural differences or, as Bauman argued in *Culture as Praxis*, were unperturbed by them (Z. Bauman, 1973/1999, pp. 106–107). This changed radically with the decline of the feudal system, which saw "gamekeepers" replaced by "gardeners". The role of tradition was systematically pushed aside and its significance eclipsed by the structures, institutions and norms typical of capitalist society (see Braudel, 1992). At the same time, the new intellectual elite (whom Bauman called *les philosophes*)⁹ enjoyed the complete support of the authorities in striving to remodel reality in conformity to their design of a harmonious and enduring order. The world was supposed to resemble a carefully cultivated garden in which the work involving the planting of certain vegetal species was accompanied by removing those denounced as "weeds". In practice, this meant that the modern world was envisioned as having no room for institutions, structures and, finally, entire social groups that did not fit in with the pre-planned pattern.¹⁰

This manner of problematizing modernity was essential to Bauman's analyses of the Holocaust. He understood the vision of the Third Reich, pre-designed and systematically implemented by the Nazis, as a perfect exemplification of "gardening" culture. In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, he reasoned that:

[T]he bureaucratic culture which prompts us to view society as an object of administration, as a collection of so many "problems" to be solved, as "nature" to be "controlled", "mastered" and "improved" or "remade", as a legitimate target of "social engineering", and in general a garden to be designed and kept in the planned shape by force (the gardening posture divides vegetation into "cultured plants" to be taken care of, and weeds to be exterminated), was the very atmosphere in which the idea of the Holocaust could be conceived, slowly yet consistently developed, and brought to its conclusion. (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. 18)

9 On the criticism of Bauman's concept of *les philosophes*, see e.g. Rattansi, 2017, pp. 21–34.

10 Bauman's explorations of "otherness" predated his interest in the modern condition. As early as in *Sketches in the Theory of Culture* (original title: *Szkice z teorii kultury*) written before his forced emigration from Poland but published half a century later, Bauman discussed "the margins" of culture as an aspect of reality typified by the multiplicity and contradiction of meanings and, therefore, generating a range of conflicts (Z. Bauman, 1968/2018, pp. 107–116). Subsequently, in *Culture as Praxis* (1973), he built on the works of Mary Douglas (1966) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/1956) to probe into the anxiety and insecurity bred by ambiguity (Z. Bauman, 1973/1999, pp. 97–124). In his later studies produced within the postmodern or liquid modern conceptual framework, Bauman frequently revisited those earlier findings (see e.g. Z. Bauman, 1997).

Bauman highlighted that, in line with the ideals of modern “blueprint utopias” (Jacoby, 2005), the Nazis were driven to create a new and change-resistant order and then expand it into other countries. At the same time, this entailed that the groups deemed “strange”, ones that diverged from the preconceived ideal, would be eliminated like “weeds”.

As opposed to many other researchers of the Holocaust, Bauman did not consider either the conjuncture in Germany or the hostility stemming from antisemitic attitudes to have been a key factor in the genesis of the Holocaust.¹¹ He examined these two issues within a broader horizon of the distinctive features of modernity. Regarding the former, he contended that, theoretically, the Holocaust could have happened anywhere else in the “civilized” – that is, “gardening” culture-governed – world. Bauman (Z. Bauman & Tester, 2001, p. 86) argued that “[t]he trouble with blaming Germany and its *Sonderweg* is that everybody else is exonerated. What is forgotten then is that the essential ideas of ‘racial stock’ and eugenic (race-improving) policies were invented, acquired scientific credentials and received public acclaim far outside German borders”. As to the latter factor, Bauman maintained that antisemitism alone¹² could not possibly have led to the disaster of the Holocaust. No matter how formidable antisemitism became during the Second World War, it was not capable of inducing sufficiently powerful murderous desires in people, let alone prompting them to execute these desires. “Racism comes into its own only in the context of the design of the perfect society and intention to implement the design through planned and consistent effort”, Bauman averred in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. 66).

Without delving into the critique of Bauman’s analysis of the Holocaust as the legacy of “gardening culture” (see Marshman, 2008; Tokarska-Bakir, 2022; Vetlesen, 2005), I will focus here on the mutability and continuity of his later observations concerning the attitude to “otherness”. Bauman’s initially very optimistic view of the postmodern condition, which he would later dub “liquid modernity”, resulted from, among other factors, his profound belief that it was going to put an end to designing, disciplinary and, ultimately, totalitarian pursuits. In the world that was emerging from the debris of “gardening culture”, values and attitudes poles apart from this culture were gaining traction (Z. Bauman, 1987, 1991). It was a time when a new appreciation for “otherness” and “difference” emerged. “Otherness” morphed from a category consigned to the “margins” of culture (Z. Bauman, 1968/2018, pp. 107–116) into a central cultural phenomenon. At the same time, Bauman observed in *Modernity and the Holocaust*: “One can assume that situations calling for a direct take-over of social management by the state may well happen in some not too distant future – and then the well-entrenched and

11 The opposite standpoint on this issue was espoused by, for example, Daniel Goldhagen (1996).

12 Bauman borrowed Artur Sandauer’s (1982) concept of “allosemitism”, whose semantic scope comprised both “antisemitism” and “philosemitism”. They both used the term to convey the perception of Jews as “others”, “strangers”, “exceptional” or “ambivalent”. It was this status that Bauman believed stood at the origin of hostility against Jews. This hostility surfaced with particular vehemence in the modern age.

well-tested racist perspective may come handy” (Z. Bauman, 1989/2000c, p. 81). The issue which this statement invoked would be an important thread in Bauman’s investigations over many years to come (e.g. Z. Bauman, 2016; Z. Bauman & Donskis, 2016).

At the beginning of the 21st century, Bauman warned: “A spectre hovers over the planet: the spectre of xenophobia” (Z. Bauman, 2003, p. 119). At the time, he primarily attributed this state of affairs to aggravating insecurity, which he identified as a constitutive feature of liquid modernity (Z. Bauman, 2006). He discerned the salient role of insecurity across the spheres of life, starting from love relations (Z. Bauman, 2003), to career (Z. Bauman, 1998), to international politics (Z. Bauman, 2002). He claimed that modern culture offered multiple ways of venting this anxiety and counted the scapegoating mechanism (Girard, 1982/1986) among the most important channels. Under the logic of scapegoating, fears spawned by liquid modernity were, as Bauman contended, projected onto “strangers”, whose inventory included, among other groups, ethnic minorities, economic immigrants and refugees.¹³ “People worn out and dead tired as a result of forever inconclusive tests of adequacy, and frightened to the raw by the mysterious, inexplicable precariousness of their fortunes and by the global mists hiding their prospects from view, desperately seek culprits for their trials and tribulations”, Bauman reasoned to conclude: “They find them, unsurprisingly, under the nearest lamp-post – in the only spot obligingly illuminated by the forces of law and order” (Z. Bauman, 2003, p. 119).

Bauman’s considerations on liquid modernity, as with his account of “gardening” cultures, emphatically highlighted the role of the institutions of power in sustaining and also often perpetuating negative attitudes to “strangers”. He argued that, as the state and its structures were systematically dwindling, partly as a result of the expansion of the culture of individualism and the domination of the market institutions, as mentioned above, governments were looking for new ways to win voters’ support. Security issues and concerns were usually raised in this context and, in Bauman’s view, governments, so to speak, needed “strangers” in order to style themselves as capable of protecting the citizens against the alleged threat they posed. For example, as a response to Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s notorious statement that “all terrorists are immigrants”, Bauman commented: “For the ears of governments wishing to redeem, against all odds, their seriously lopsided and sinking *raison d’être*, it must sound like the horn of a salvage-boat sailing out of the dense, impenetrable fog in which the horizon of their survival struggle has been wrapped” (Z. Bauman, 2016, p. 32).

It was also through this lens that Bauman looked into attitudes to “strangers” after the September 11 attacks (Z. Bauman, 2002), during the economic meltdown of the late 2000s (Z. Bauman & Roviroso-Madrado, 2009) and when so-called migration panic broke out (Z. Bauman, 2016). In each case, he argued that the real risk to citizens’ sense

13 This theme was Bauman’s focal point in *Strangers at Our Door*, a book published one year before his death, where he examined the unfolding migrant crisis (Z. Bauman, 2016).

of safety was instrumentally exploited by governments.¹⁴ A result, as he observed, “[c]ulture’ becomes a synonym for a fortress under siege, and the inhabitants of fortresses under siege are expected to manifest their loyalty daily, and give up, or at least radically curtail, any contacts with the outside world” (Z. Bauman, 2012, p. 190).¹⁵

Bauman embedded these processes in yet another context in *Retrotopia*, the last book he authored (Z. Bauman, 2017a). In its opening, he evoked Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* to propose, following Walter Benjamin, that the painting represented an angle of history (Benjamin, 1940/1968) but, at the same time, to affirm, in contradistinction to Benjamin, that the horror on the angel’s face sprang not from what he saw in the past, but in the future. This construal was anchored in the idea that in confrontation with an increasingly uncertain future, the past was perceived as a haven of security and tranquillity. In this way, Bauman rendered the core of the “nostalgic turn”, which he regarded, like many other 21st-century intellectuals (see Boym, 2001; Jacobsen, 2020; Salmoose, 2019), as one of the preeminent phenomena of our times. The nostalgic turn denotes an enhanced interest in the past, which is treated either as a point of reference for practices, norms and institutions or as a repertory which individuals can mine at will to construct their identity narratives.¹⁶ Bauman emphasized that pivotal to this process was a return to strong cultural identities, which took place with eager support from, or rather under the auspices of, state institutions. It was in this context that he analysed the snowballing prominence of nationalist attitudes and spreading populism observable in the 21st century (Z. Bauman, 2017b).

To conclude this section, I would like to revisit the typology of “gamekeepers” and “gardeners” cited at its beginning. Carrying this line of reasoning into the 21st century, Bauman proposed the metaphor of “a hunter” to picture the liquid modern mindset (Z. Bauman, 2007b, pp. 94–110). The “hunter” metaphor is fitting because, rather than establishing an immutable order for others to submit to, a hunter’s aim is to continually endeavour to improve his/her own living conditions. In this way, the blueprint utopia transfigures into an “individualized” utopia, as Bauman claims, while for a variety of reasons, including those discussed above, he regards it as a dystopia (see Brzeziński, 2015; Jacobsen, 2008). Notably, the metaphors of “gamekeeper”, “gardener” and “hunter” should be viewed as Weber’s ideal types, that is, as tools for analysing, but not for describing, reality (Weber, 1922/1978).¹⁷ This is explicitly borne out by the considerable attention that Bauman devoted in his investigations of liquid modernity not only to the

14 Following Giorgio Agamben, Bauman claimed that the politics founded on catering to the sense of security was vividly epitomized by, among other operations, “state of exception” (Agamben, 2003/2005).

15 On political and ideological contexts of Bauman’s late work, see e.g. Czapnik (2018); Stoll (2017).

16 The former type of contemporary investment in the past has been labelled as ‘restorative nostalgia’ and the latter as ‘reflective nostalgia’ by Svetlana Boym (2001). Her study *The Future of Nostalgia* was an important inspiration for Bauman’s work on *Retrotopia*.

17 Bauman’s outlook on ideal types is neatly encapsulated in his statement that they “are useful, and also indispensable, cognitive tools even if (or perhaps *because*) they deliberately throw light on certain aspects of described social reality while leaving in the shade some other aspects considered to be of lesser or only random relevance to the essential, necessary traits of a particular form of life” (Z. Bauman, 2007a, p. 27; italics original).

“hunter” condition but also to “gardening” preoccupations. As shown above, Bauman argued that the pursuit of congruence between the state structures and culture was a fundamental process in our times. Furthermore, he claimed that the dissemination of xenophobic attitudes was an effect of this process. To sum up, Bauman insisted that liquid modernity was the site of permanent struggle between two attitudes: “mixophilia” and “mixophobia” (Z. Bauman, 2003).

Conclusions

Five years after the publication of *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman resumed the themes addressed in it in “The Holocaust: Fifty Years Later” (Z. Bauman, 1994).¹⁸ In that paper, having outlined his fundamental insights into the genesis and the course of the Holocaust, he went on to discuss the possibility of similar events occurring in the future. He stated that the collapse of the totalitarian Nazi and Communist regimes should not divert our attention from the fact that the paradigm in which they had been rooted invariably harboured seeds of destruction. In this article, I have focused on two of them: the mechanism of adiaphorization and the social construction of “otherness”. I have shown how they contributed to the genesis of the Holocaust, and then pointed out the role they play in today’s world. Adiaphorization is associated with the development of the culture of individualism and consumer society and with the implementation of technological innovation. For its part, xenophobia is largely derivable from liquid modern insecurity. As with solid modernity, these two processes also pose a serious threat today, according to Bauman. In “The Holocaust: Fifty Years Later”, he claimed:

No one predicted the form that the Holocaust would take; let us not pretend we know the forms future holocausts may take, that we know who may perpetrate them and against whom. What we know now (or at least what we can know, if we so wish) is that roots of concentrated acts of inhumanity on the gigantic Holocaust scale lie deep down in the very fashion in which we organize our human existence, and that the only way of keeping the Holocaust a fully and truly closed chapter is to act on that uncomfortable, disturbing knowledge. (Z. Bauman, 1994, p. 33)

At the turn of the 20th century, Bauman was committed to championing the development of postmodern ethics and cultural plurality. He recognized the two as examples of “active utopia” (Z. Bauman, 1976).¹⁹ This was how he understood the ideas geared to relativizing the existing reality and, at the same time, to promoting efforts to transform it. In this regard, his engaged sociology stood in stark contrast to “blueprint” utopias

18 The article is a reworking of Bauman’s talk at a conference held by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw on 29–31 March 1993 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

19 There are several similarities between Bauman’s concept of “active” utopia (Z. Bauman, 1976) and Georg Picht’s (1969/1981) vision of “critical” utopia, Jeffrey C. Alexander’s (2001) model of “limited” utopia and Fredric Jameson’s (1991) idea of “the Utopian impulse”.

characteristic of modernity (see Brzeziński, 2015). In the paper mentioned above, Bauman himself admitted that: “We are fated to act without certainty of success; and however much we may desire such certainty, we ought to be wary of those who offer patented ‘solutions’ to the ‘problem’” (Z. Bauman, 1994, p. 33). He went on to observe that many contemporary processes and phenomena contradicted the utopian ideas he propounded, yet bringing his argument to an end, he added that: “Following them will not be an easy matter. But following them, staunchly and vigorously, is the only thing we can do” (Z. Bauman, 1994, p. 33).

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Płynna nowoczesność i Holocaust

Abstrakt: W *Nowoczesności i Zagładzie* Zygmunt Bauman dowodził, że Holocaust nie był bynajmniej zaprzeczeniem procesu cywilizacyjnego, ale – wręcz przeciwnie – jego konsekwencją. Przekonywał, że cechy konstytutywne stałej fazy nowoczesności, takie jak kultura biurokratyczna, wzrost znaczenia racjonalności instrumentalnej czy też dominacja myślenia utopijnego o projektanckim wymiarze, znalazły swoje odzwierciedlenie w genezie i przebiegu Zagłady. Jego nadrzędnym celem przy pisaniu tego dzieła było dokonanie zasadniczych zmian w problematyzowaniu nowoczesności w naukach społecznych, a także wskazanie na konieczność rozwijania norm, wartości i postaw, które byłyby wobec niej opozycyjne. Przywołanie tych faktów jest dla mnie punktem wyjścia do analizy późniejszych rozpoznań Baumana poświęconych Holocaustowi. Koncentrując się na dwóch kwestiach, które podkreślał on w kontekście genezy Zagłady, to jest mechanizmie adiaforyzacji oraz procesie społecznego konstruowania „obcości”, unaoczniam to, jak zjawiska te materializują się w płynnej nowoczesności. Wskazuję na ich związki z takimi cechami tej kondycji, jak: rozwój indywidualizmu i kultury konsumpcyjnej, poczucie niepewności, a także „zwrot nostalgiczny”. Podkreślam, że zdaniem Baumana zarówno moralna obojętność, jak i ksenofobia są coraz istotniejszymi fenomenami we współczesnym społeczeństwie, co może wiązać się z bardzo groźnymi – na dziś trudnymi do przewidzenia – konsekwencjami. W artykule dowodzę, że sposób, w jaki pisał on zarówno o stałej, jak i płynnej fazie nowoczesności, charakteryzował się poetyką dystopijną, która stanowiła wstęp do jego myślenia o utopijnym charakterze.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: nowoczesność; Zagłada; Zygmunt Bauman; adiaforyzacja; obcość



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